Mrs Chapman to Mr Steinthal.

Paris Dec 10th 1853.

Dear Mr Steinthal,

I owe many thanks to our common friend, Miss Estlin, for putting it in my power to make your acquaintance. "There are so few of us for these principles!" as the old Scotch Covenanters used to say. To know one more Abolitionist is an addition to our forces not of one figure only but of all that one figure may signify on the right side. After twenty years off battle or of endurance as the case may require it does not in the least shock my nerves to speak & to hear speak of "party spirit" – of "this side" and "the other side" – for I early learnt that there was a right & a wrong side in all divisions upon moral questions, however the way right be obscured by mistakes on both sides. The Lord, as our Calvinistic brethren would express it, has a side in these matters; and I cite these words reverently, as embodying my own opinion ——— My dear Miss Estlin has kindly confided to me your excellent letter touching one of the differences in our cause, which is not a division; that concerning the constitutional question

It certainly seems at first sight, that men might, as you suggest, vote with a declaration that by so doing they mean to change, not obey the constitution. Men have done so, very innocently, & found their declaration empty air, & their vote practically supporting slavery. Our constitution is not like yours, unwritten, – a mere mass of precedents, & just what an act of parliament may declare it to be, the sum total of the manners and customs of ages. It is all this and more. It is engrossed on Parchment – our eldest Scripture as a nation, and all our manners & customs have been moulded by it. And it was not only a Scripture but a bargain. It was the instrument that brought the two communities of different sentiments on slavery, into one. It was the compact by which the South bound herself to the North, on condition that the North should guarantee the existence of Slavery in perpetuity. (Slavery being thus, as the Southern Statesmen claim, the corner-stone of our republics, the constitutional fabric falls to the ground when it is removed. Whatever other alterations it may be susceptible of, neither freedom for the whites nor Slavery for the blacks can be erased from its provisions till the will of the whole Nation shall be renovated. At present, unhappily, the two irreconcilable principles having been found like fire & gunpowder to each other, men are sacrificing the principle of life to that of destruction. Our question is simply of the best means of opening their eyes & changing their minds.) This the North did reluctantly, & hoping that there might be

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virtue enough in the free principle it embodied to kill the Slave-principle, but she did it. To obtain this concession the Southern Statesmen concerned in the transaction yielded the article abolishing the slave-trade in 1808! — (twenty years in advance of that period when they sat in Council to make the Constitution) "for then" whispered they to each other "our own vigintial crop will be ready for the market, & we shall have gained a monopoly of the trade by the same act which seems to these Northern men, a blow at its existence." Thus framed and compromised together the constitutional machine rolled on — its enunciation of the principles of liberty & human rights on one side, & on the other its return of fugitive slaves, suppression of insurrections, & its slave basis of representation, — its requisition of an oath from every office-holder to obey it, as it is. — (not as it ought to be, or is supposed to be) and its tribunal of interpreters all sworn of course to decide under and by it — not upon it — and whose interest it is, in common with all office-holders, every where, to maintain the existing order of things. By a union of good with evil, good has everything to lose, & evil everything to gain; and this case of the United States has formed no exception to the rule. Liberty had been constantly losing & Slavery constantly gaining, till the advent of Garrison put a stop to the process. For he said, in that very tone of ancient prophecy which carries with it the weight at once of reason & authority; "It is a covenant with death & an agreement with hell! come out of it — come out of it my people lest ye be tormented with its plagues!" — And why not come out of it? It was a wicked compact, therefore better broken than kept — "But it secures to us certain civil & political rights." — Not the ones we ought to value most however, these it sacrifices. The right to impart to others of liberty which we enjoy — the right to feed the hungry — clothe the naked — instruct the ignorant — the liberty to know & to utter, which Milton thought the greatest blessing of existence — these are expressly renounced. Do I seem, as you study the constitution, to give it a worse character than it deserves? I judge it by what it is & what it causes and creates. It directly enslaves the blacks, and hardly less directly enslaves the whites. My countrymen will not deny it.

"Or say ye I have falsely spoken
Calling ye slaves? Then prove ye're not.
Work a free-press! — ye'll see it broken!
Stand to defend it — ye'll be shot —

Then from your lips, let words of grace
Gleaned from the Holy Bible's pages
Fall, while ye're pleading for a race
Whose blood has flowed through chains for ages
And pray — Lord, let thy kingdom come!
And see if ye're not kicken dumb."

But suppose we make use of this delusive semblance of a right which the constitution guarantees to us: (for having renounced the main right — the right to do good, of course what remains is but a delusion) let us go through in imagination the forms which remain. I will vote for my neighbour Jenkins to go to congress. He is an antislavery man who has said everywhere that he don't mean to be bound by these constitutional provisions for enslavement, and only wishes to take his seat as a representative for the purpose of getting rid of them. He will bring in a bill of amendment. But he can't take his seat till he has taken the oath to the thing as it is. We must swallow it whole. He & I understand each other, but then it remains no less true according to the old legal latin diction — "What I do by another I am responsible for myself." Now am I ready to take this responsibility? — This is not merely an affair between me & neighbour Jenkins; there are other parties — the Southern States & the Southern Slaveholders, & the Northern men their allies, whose whole business & whose views are arranged upon the constitutional slaveholding basis. I must make them understand that while I am taking the oath to slavery, I lie to them. In what way am I to make this clear? Am I to rise in my place before the oath is administered & say "I wish the members from the sixteen Slave States, and all the members, in fine, to understand how I interpret this constitution & how I mean to act. The administrator will reply "Sir there is no legal way by which you can take your seat here but by taking the oath. With your interpretation we have nothing to do. The Supreme Judicial Court has interpreted it ever since the Nation was a Nation to mean — Slavery — That court is your interpreter here. Neither you nor we may interpret for ourselves. We are one & all agreed, (it is the literal fact) that the supreme court has the right of it. You well know that the whole country thinks so too. There are some fifty Abolitionists here & there in the land, who are trying to reconcile their consciences & their wishes by assuming a right of private interpretation, which the constitution formally, & the nature of things actually both interdict. (A government is virtually an abnegation of this right of private interpretation. The legal fiction of a social compact covers the great fact that men cannot work together except they be agreed.)

If you are one of these & cannot take the oath without such assumption there is but one way for you, Sir, & that is the way home." — We have one man in the U. S. Gerrit Smith, a man who by dint of being immensely wealthy, & doing an immense amount of good with his wealth, in virtue of being a great landholder, & at the same time what Europe calls an agrarian, — a real abolitionist, & yet no more clear-headed than the majority of his neighbours, has been able to enter into a covenant with them that if they will send him to Congress, he will take the oath (in his

interpretation of its meaning) & see what comes of acting contrary to the interpretation of others — the rest of his countrymen. We are all waiting with interest & anxiety the event. It will at least create agitation & discussion, tho' it seems a childish & imbecile measure which places for the moment a good man in a false position, & gives bad ones the momentary advantage of making him ridiculous. I think he will feel all this when he stands face to face with slaveholders, & pro-Slavery Northern men in whose breasts yet live such a sense of honour as may consist with tyranny & theft, — that "honour among thieves" of the middle ages which recognizing dimly that good faith is all that "sticks Society together" never faltered with a promise in this way, nor questioned the sanctity of veracity. To me this mode of entering Congress, supposing it practicable, seems an unworthy trick. Which will leave the Slave-holder in a measure, to all but Abolitionists; when the vision of an insurrection, he might turn to Gerrit Smith, when that plutterman shall gain a majority in Congress, & say "you have deceived me"; with all your protestations of disregard of the Constitution, I have never thought you would go through the form of swearing to sustain it & to send us men & arms to quell our insurgent slaves, & yet leave us to be massacred by them at last. Had I believed you in earnest I should long ago have fled to the North, East, West. I care not whither, & left plantation & Slaves to take care of themselves. It is clear that taking the oath with mental or oral reservation in order to obtain a seat in Congress is dissension in fact — but dissension in the mantle of childish duplicity. But suppose the member in his seat. The first thing he may be called to do is to vote an appropriation to the expenses of the federal government. There are pro-slavery expenses in every State in the Union. He cannot divide the question. He is one of the body that votes to sustain slavery. He is dragged at their chariot wheels. He strengthens their villainy by his countenance. Bad as they may be, bad as he everywhere declares them to be, they are still good enough by his own showing to be the legislators of a republican & Christian people. Nay, in order to obtain his seat — he has thought it worth while to take the same oath with them knowing how they understand it, & with no legal means of making their constituencies (to whom he owes a duty as well as to his own since he is a servant of the whole country) aware how he understands it. It looks to me precisely like riding with Turpin under oath to aid him, taken with a reservation in order to obtain a chance of to convict or arrest him. It is an absurdity that supposes the American Mania for office at its highest fury. Turpin will let that order of intellect ride with him, it may be — The sanction of your company, he will say outweighs your protest —

O'Connell c^d in all probability very conscientiously have taken oath to uphold the constitution of England. He c^d have sustained the state part of it, but not the church part of it. Would parliament, or could it have permitted the discussion of the question w^d it not have been fatal to the cause of Catholic Emancipation had its champions proposed to try the experiment? You see I have argued the question as much as possible on the ground of it's being a frank & honest thing to take an oath of this kind with explanation & reservation. But is it possible to save the heart from condemnation in such a case, once examined, but at the expence of the head. It looks at first sight, as if one might go to Congress & "scream among one's fellows" like Bryant's water-fowl. We have all thought so once, for want of political experience & political knowledge. But it does not require the second sight to show how futile it is to travel for ever in the same vicious circle. — The oath binds to two things utterly incompatible with each other. Any seeming union of them for a political purpose c^d be effected only thro' a sacrifice. The sacrifice was on the side of the good principle. As the thing began, so it has gone on. The supporters of the good principle love it less than the supporters of the bad principle do theirs. W^d Slaveholders have formed the Union without Slavery as a component part? No! they refused; while the Northern men w^d gladly have formed a Union without it. In order to make room for Slavery in their ship of State they were obliged to cast overboard just so much of their own freedom. It is time this state of things sh^d cease to exist. It will ruin us, the Abolitionists, temporally speaking, to thrust our hands into the Machinery. It is the same that spins & weaves our living. We too may be Senators & millionaires, & Foreign Ministers, if we will let it's wheels run uninterruptedly, & crush the three millions as they run. But never mind! here goes! It is our religion! For truth! for Justice! for Freedom? for humanity! for God & Native Land! for a World's redemption! —— Thus I have tried to show the reasons for our disunion movement. You see we know on what temptations men fail to join it. But we are not thereby divided from them. We can even see that in the deadly miasma of the lower regions where they are feeling their way thro' the fog they may be honest, tho' blinded; & devoted, tho' unfeebled. But is it not right in us to call to them continually "Friends, come up hither!" We came up, the moment we heard that call, & we have found the benefit of being put in a better way. Why sh^d we not do for others what has been done with us? I am led to these last remarks by the knowledge that there are persons in England ill-disposed to the cause, who are, & have been for about fourteen years sowing & disseminating falsehoods on these subjects. It is their policy to

represent the Abolitionists as broken up into parties. This is not the case. There are in our ranks diversities of opinion, but there are no divisions of heart. There have been many instances of men who "did run well for a time", but on finding it a life-long race have abandoned it in despair, & like Bunyans Pliable & Obstinate & Temporary, + Turnback have "struggled back the way towards their own home" & done a thousand other base things of which they are ashamed, & to justify themselves are "picking holes in the coats of the Saints". These men are not worth mentioning except for the fact that it has suited I know not what purposes of Joseph Sturge & others to fraternize with them in just the same degree that they ceased to be Abolitionists.

But I am wandering from the subject of your letter & will only add, that it is not on the dissension question any more than on the free labour question that there exists a division of heart among the Abolitionists. The Hon. Mr. Giddings, Gerrit Smith, & others are to be blamed by us for what we consider their shortcomings because they appreciated the devotedness to the cause which makes us willing to do it. For F. Douglass he is like Harvey Wood "fighting for his own hand". he will always take the course that most promotes his own interest.

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I am, my dear Mr Steinthal

Ever truly yours

for our common cause

A H Chapman.

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